CLAIMS:

Please amend the claims according to the status designations in the following list, which contains all claims that were ever in the application, with the text of all active claims.

1. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) A method for the delivery of an incoming message in a messaging system comprising a central server of said messaging system, a plurality of messaging nodes, a plurality of portable messaging units with user interface means for display of messages, a plurality of user accounts, ~~accounts with distinct messaging address identifiers, and~~ a communications means for establishing [[a]] an intermittent first communications link between each of said messaging nodes and said central ~~server;~~ server, and a communications means for establishing a temporary second communications link between portable messaging units and any of at least a subset of said messaging nodes; said method comprising the steps of a) maintaining an association table, associating user accounts with at least one messaging node; b) identifying ~~at least one~~ a user account indicated as a recipient of said incoming message, determined from a header of said incoming message; c) determining membership of a messaging node within a primary messaging ~~zone, corresponding to a subset of said~~ zone comprising the messaging nodes associated in said association table with said ~~recipient user account;~~ user account of the recipient; d) transmitting said incoming message across said first communications link to said messaging node within said primary messaging zone; ~~node, and~~ e) buffering said incoming message at said messaging [[node,]] node within said primary messaging zone; f) establishing a temporary second communications link between a portable messaging unit and said messaging node, and g) conducting a data exchange over said second communications link, including transmission from said portable messaging unit to said messaging node of ~~prior to~~ a user request to collect new messages from said messaging system, and transmission from said messaging node to said portable messaging unit of said incoming message, while said first communications link between said messaging node and said central server is not connected and said messaging

node is not in communication with any other messaging nodes within said primary messaging zone, whereby said incoming message is proactively buffered at ~~messaging nodes~~ a messaging node within said primary messaging zone from which ~~recipients may~~ the message recipient subsequently ~~request~~ requests the collection of said incoming ~~message.~~ message while said first communications link is not connected.

2. (CANCELED)

3. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The method of claim 1, wherein said messaging system includes a multilevel network architecture including a sequence of multiple communications links between network elements comprising said first communications link between said central server and said messaging node.

4. (CANCELED)

5. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The method of claim [[4,]] 1, wherein said data exchange is conducted via a photonic communications system.

6. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The method of claim [[4,]] 1, wherein said data exchange is conducted via a supersonic communications system.

7. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The method of claim [[4,]] 1, wherein said data exchange is conducted via a low power radio frequency transceiver communications system with a communications range under 100 meters.

8. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The method of claim [[4,]] 1, wherein said data exchange is conducted via a temporary data cable.

9. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The method of claim [[4,]] 1, wherein said messaging nodes include docking ports for communication with said portable messaging units.

10. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The method of claim [[4,]] 1, wherein said data exchange is initiated upon the placement of one of said portable messaging units in a docking port associated with said messaging node.

11. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The method of claim [[4,]] 1, wherein said data exchange is encrypted.

12. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The method of claim [[4,]] 1, wherein at least one of said portable messaging units ~~may be~~ is configured ~~by the user~~ to conduct data exchanges on behalf of a plurality of user accounts.

13. (ORIGINAL) The method of claim 1, wherein said buffered message is retained in storage at said message node until at least one of the following conditions are met: a) said buffered message has been collected from said messaging node; b) said buffered message has been collected from another messaging node; c) said buffered message has been uncollected for longer than a predetermined interval; d) or said messaging node buffer storage utilization exceeds predetermined limits.

14. (ORIGINAL) The method of claim 1, wherein said messaging nodes are located at a plurality of publicly accessible locations across a geographic region.

15. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The method of claim 1, wherein said association table associates ~~at least one of said user accounts~~ said user account with a plurality of said messaging ~~nodes.~~ nodes, and wherein said incoming message is transmitted from said central server to, and buffered at, a plurality of messaging nodes within said primary messaging zone prior to the delivery of said incoming message to said portable messaging unit over said second communications link.

16. (ORIGINAL) The method of claim 1, wherein said first communications link comprises a dial-up modem connection.

17. (ORIGINAL) The method of claim 1, wherein said first communications link comprises a store-and-forward satellite communications system.

18. (CANCELED)

19. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The method of claim 1, wherein said incoming message is an automated response to an outgoing message previously sent from said user account, where said

outgoing message was a request for ~~advanced network functions.~~ network webpage retrieval and said incoming message includes a copy of said webpage.

20. (CANCELED)

21. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) A method for the delivery of an incoming message in a messaging system comprising a central server of said messaging system, ~~a plurality of messaging nodes,~~ a plurality of user ~~accounts with distinct messaging address identifiers,~~ accounts, a plurality of messaging nodes each providing access to locally buffered messages for a plurality of user accounts, and a communications means for establishing [[a]] an intermittent first communications link between each of said messaging nodes and said central server, said method comprising the steps of a) maintaining an association table, associating user accounts with at least one messaging node; b) identifying ~~at least one~~ a user account indicated as a recipient of said incoming message, determined from a header of said incoming message; c) identifying a primary messaging ~~zone, corresponding to a subset of said~~ zone comprising the messaging nodes associated in said association table with said ~~recipient~~ user account of the recipient; ~~account;~~ d) transmitting said incoming message across said first communications link to ~~members of~~ each messaging node within said primary messaging ~~zone, and~~ zone; e) buffering said incoming message at said messaging ~~nodes,~~ nodes within said primary messaging zone, and f) detecting at one of said messaging nodes ~~prior to~~ a user request to collect new messages from said messaging system, and delivering said incoming message from this messaging node to said user while said first communications link between this messaging node and said central server is not connected, whereby said incoming message is proactively buffered at ~~messaging nodes~~ a messaging node within said primary messaging zone from which ~~recipients may~~ the message recipient subsequently ~~request~~ requests the collection of said incoming ~~message.~~ message while said first communications link is not connected.

22. (CANCELED)

23. (NEW) The method of claim 21, wherein said primary messaging zone comprises a plurality of messaging nodes, and said incoming message is transmitted over intermittent first

communications links from said central server to, and buffered at, each of said messaging nodes within said primary messaging zone prior to the step of delivery of said incoming message from one of said messaging nodes within said primary messaging zone.

24. (NEW) The method of claim 21, wherein said messaging system further comprises a plurality of portable messaging units including communications means for establishing a temporary second communications link with any of at least a subset of said messaging nodes, and user interface means for the display of messages; and wherein the communications of step (f) are conducted over said second communications link, including transmission from a portable messaging unit of said user request to collect new messages, and transmission to said portable messaging unit of said incoming message.

25. (NEW) The method of claim 24, wherein said primary messaging zone comprises a plurality of messaging nodes, and said incoming message is transmitted over intermittent first communications links from said central server to, and buffered at, each of said messaging nodes within said primary messaging zone prior to the step of delivery of said incoming message from one of said messaging nodes within said primary messaging zone to said portable messaging unit.

26. (NEW) The method of claim 25, further comprising the steps of re-establishing said first communications link between said central server and the messaging node where said incoming message was transmitted to said portable messaging unit; transmitting to said central server over said first communications link information indicating that this message was delivered; and transmitting from said central server to other messaging units within said primary messaging zone a cancellation command to delete their buffered copies of said incoming message.

27. (NEW) A method for the delivery of an incoming message in a messaging system comprising a central server of said messaging system, a plurality of user accounts, a plurality of messaging nodes each providing access to locally buffered messages for a plurality of user accounts, and an intermittent communications means for establishing a first communications link between each of said messaging nodes and said central server; said method comprising the steps of a) maintaining

an association table, associating each of a plurality of user accounts with a plurality of messaging nodes; b) identifying a user account indicated as a recipient of said incoming message, determined from a header of said incoming message; c) determining membership of a messaging node within a primary messaging zone comprising the messaging nodes associated in said association table with said user account of the recipient; d) transmitting said incoming message across said first communications link to said messaging node within said primary messaging zone; e) buffering said incoming message at said messaging node, and f) detecting at said messaging node a user request to collect new messages from said messaging system, and delivering said incoming message from this messaging node to said user while said first communications link between this messaging node and said central server is not connected, whereby said incoming message is proactively buffered at a messaging node within said primary messaging zone from which the message recipient subsequently requests the collection of said incoming message while said first communications link is not connected.